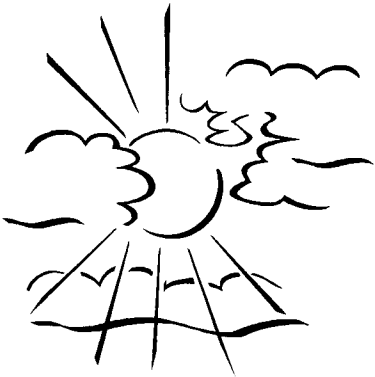


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Articles in Today's Clips

Thursday, January 19, 2006

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Heat bills surge, service shut-offs hold steady

Thursday, January 19, 2006

By Peter Luke
The Grand Rapids Press

LANSING -- Thousands of cash-strapped natural gas customers in Michigan are avoiding service shut-offs by enrolling in emergency installment plans that will have them paying off their higher winter heating bills through next fall.

Although natural gas prices are up more than 50 percent this winter, customer shut-offs for nonpayment in the last two months of 2005 were about the same as the year before, the state's two largest utilities report.

Consumers Energy terminated service to 2,914 residential customers in November and December, compared to 2,840 customers in the last two months of 2004, spokesman Jeff Holyfield said.

Michigan Consolidated Gas Co., a subsidiary of DTE Energy, reported 3,800 shutoffs in November and December, 100 fewer than in 2004.

Going into the winter heating season, state regulators feared customers would not be able to afford monthly heating bills that have climbed above \$200 for the average consumer.

Utility executives reiterated this week that no customers should have their gas shut off because they cannot pay. But they advised customers anticipating a cash crunch to contact their utilities to make payment arrangements before they receive a shut-off notice.

"First and foremost, no one needs to have their energy disrupted during the heating season," said Steve Ewing, vice chairman of DTE Energy. "Second, no low-income customer, no senior citizen can have their service terminated in the winter heating months."

Those older than 65 or families with household incomes totaling about \$38,000 for a family of four are eligible to stretch out their winter bill payments into next fall.

The state's Winter Protection Plan, under arrangement with utilities, requires low-income households to make minimum monthly payments through March 31 equal to 7 percent of their estimated annual natural gas bill. Those older than 65 can defray all payments until April.

Between April 1 and Nov. 1, customers must then pay off money owed in installments.

Consumers Energy, which serves 1.6 million Michigan residences, had 57,000 customers in the protection plan this month compared to 48,000 a year ago.

Len Singer, a spokesman for Michigan Consolidated Gas, said the number of customers in its protection plan has nearly doubled this year to about 30,000.

The energy provider has 1.2 million Michigan residential customers, about 270,000 of whom pay their annual heating bill over 12 months on a budget plan open to all customers. Consumers Energy has about 364,000 customers on its budget billing plan.

Utility officials caution, however, that the Winter Protection Plan provides temporary relief. Paying off \$1,000 in winter heating charges starting in April translates into \$142 a month for seven months. That's on top of regular natural gas charges for those months.

The installment plans are offered through utility companies to customers who contact them, said DTE Spokesman Scott Simons

Locally, human service agency officials could not speculate how many people could be enrolled in those plans but said they are using many approaches to help homeowners keep heating costs down.

"It's just a hard time for people, especially people who have limited income," said Karen Tolan, associate director for Area Community Services and Employment and Training Council. "Our calls are up by 35 percent right now, and it will get worse. We encourage people to get on budget plans and do what they can do."

Tolan's organization offers emergency utility assistance as a last resort as well as help with getting tax rebates for heating and winterizing homes. The agency typically winterizes about 200 homes a year by adding insulation, repairing windows and fixing furnaces in low-income homes that qualify.

Grand Rapids residents Chad and Heather Abram recently took advantage of the program and had insulation added to their attic and walls and also replaced doors.

"Before, the walls were hollow, the doors were hollow, and when you sat in the living room you could feel a breeze coming across your feet," Chad Abram said. "It's made a huge difference and should save us quite a bit on the heating bill."

Abram said the couple is enrolled in the monthly budget plan with their gas company and have seen their payments drop from about \$90 to \$60.

Press writer Kyla King contributed to this story.

Agency aims to chill bills

Thursday, January 19, 2006

By Brian Wheeler
bwheeler@citpat.com -- 768-4928

Using pennies, dollars and more, the Community Action Agency is hoping to raise a record amount in its push to cover local home-heating costs.

The agency Tuesday kicked off its annual Heat A Home Campaign, an effort that helps with energy bills for those who don't typically qualify for assistance.

With soaring heating prices, an agency official said the hope is to collect as much as \$9,000, up from \$5,000 to \$7,000 usually. The increase would be needed as those costs push some households toward financial trouble.

"It's that population of people who have never found themselves in a situation before, where people can't pay their utility bills, shopping and gas to get to work," said Brenda Leonard, the agency's community services director.

The campaign, which runs through Jan. 31, will use a few new wrinkles. Paragon Charter Academy and Parma Elementary School will collect pennies. Jackson Christian School, too, will charge a penny a vote for sleds in its Ground Hog Derby on Jan. 28, with proceeds going toward the effort.

Volunteers will take donations Jan. 28 at Wal-Mart, and several businesses will sell \$1 donation cards. They are: the Jackson Transportation Authority, local McDonald's restaurants, the Evelyn Bay Coffee Co., Reardon Realty, Sunrise Express, Airport Restaurant & Spirits, Best Books and Family Services and Children's Aid.

The campaign joins other efforts to help low-income residents with heating bills. A new collaboration between the United Way of Jackson County, nonprofits and churches has an estimated \$54,000 in pledges.

Residents register for heating help

Phone calls inundated Capital Area Community Services on Wednesday as local residents scrambled to register for free home-heating kits.

The kits, announced Tuesday by Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Michigan's major utility companies, are going to be offered on a first-come, first-serve basis to people who register and attend two-hour winterization workshops, which will begin next month.

Just 3,450 kits will be available. They will include programmable thermostats, caulk, compact fluorescent light bulbs, door weather-stripping and other energy-saving materials. There is no income restriction for receiving one.

Although details of the workshops have yet to be determined, more than 200 area residents already have signed up, said Ivan Love, executive director of the local agency. Love said he doesn't yet know how many kits the area will receive but residents can put their name on a list to be contacted when the workshops are scheduled.

To get on the list, call 393-7077.

Thursday, January 19, 2006

Jobless blues won't fade

Michigan finishes up 2005 with 6.8 percent rate, which is expected to move higher in next two years.

Louis Aguilar / The Detroit News

Michigan lost 24,000 payroll jobs in 2005 as it continued to hemorrhage factory work, leaving the state with one of the nation's highest jobless rates.

In December, the state's unemployment rate increased to 6.7 percent, a one-tenth of a percentage point rise from November.

For all of 2005, Michigan's jobless rate was 6.8 percent, down slightly from a year ago but still far above the nation's 5.1 percent rate.

The gap between Michigan's tough economy and the nation's stable, steady growth persisted all year.

In addition, several economists predict the state's unemployment rate will head back up for the next two years.

"There is no way around it. Michigan is at the bottom of the barrel," said Patrick Anderson, a Lansing-based economist. "It's not a positive sign . . . that a state that normally does better than the nation during the good times is at the bottom."

Those looking for work are feeling the pinch.

"This time it's different. Too many long-time companies have gone away," said Craig Reinke, 50, of Farmington Hills, as he spruced up his resume at a Michigan Works! office in Southfield. A machine toolmaker for 32 years, he was laid off Monday.

Workers such as Reinke are the backbone of Michigan's economy. For much of his life, he and hundreds of thousands of Michigan workers could count on high-wage factory jobs with plenty of overtime. But that Michigan tradition is quickly dying, beset by fierce global competition, rampant health care and pension costs and the declining market share of domestic automakers.

In 2005, some 21,000 manufacturing jobs vanished in Michigan. The state has lost a third of its manufacturing jobs -- 111,000 -- since 2000. The average weekly earnings of such workers in 2005 were \$904.07, down \$1.58 from 2004, an indication of declining wages and less overtime.

"Until a few years ago, I never seriously worried about getting work," Reinke said. "Now, I truly wonder how I can keep working until retirement age."

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's office said 2005 jobless showed slight improvement compared to the recent past. "For the first year time in five years the jobless rate is down," said Liz Boyd, press secretary for the governor. Boyd pointed out that Granholm's multibillion dollar infrastructure program and her 21st Century jobs program helped create work.

She further noted Granholm's \$600 million tax incentives aimed at encouraging manufacturers firms to consolidate in Michigan at a time of widespread downsizing in the industry.

The size of the state's labor force and the number of unemployed did not change much in December compared to November. Total employment in Michigan has been stable the past four months, according to the state's Department of Labor and Economic Growth. .

But with the auto industry's continued painful restructuring, no one says Michigan's troubles are over.

The state's jobless rate will balloon to 7.4 percent this year and 7.5 percent next year, according to a report by the nonpartisan state Senate Fiscal Agency. State Treasury numbers are somewhat more optimistic, pegging it at 6.8 percent through 2007. University of Michigan economists forecast the rate will rise to 6.9 percent this year and 7.4 percent in 2007.

But in some pockets of the state, economic development officials hope the worst is over. "For our region, we are definitely looking at an upswing," said Tim Daman, vice president for economic development with the Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce. "We feel we have hit the bottom of the curve."

Michigan gained an estimated 10,000 nonfarm payroll jobs in December. About half of the gains came from hiring in the professional and business services. But for many residents, including Detroiter Nancy Miller, finding a job is still too tough. She spends three days a week at the Michigan Works! office searching for work in the marketing and clerical sectors.

The Associated Press contributed to this story. You can reach Louis Aguilar at (313) 222-2760 or laguilar@detnews.com.

Michigan's jobless rate climbs

State loses 24,000 jobs in all of 2005

January 19, 2006

BY JOHN GALLAGHER
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

Michigan's unemployment rate edged up during December in a lackluster finish to another difficult year for the state's workers.

Overall, the state lost another 24,000 jobs in 2005. And with further layoffs ahead in the domestic automotive industry, economists say Michigan workers are likely to hear more bad news before things turn around.

The state's Department of Labor and Economic Growth reported Wednesday that the Michigan jobless rate rose 0.1 percentage point to 6.7% -- still substantially higher than the national rate of 4.9% last month.

December's slight rise means that Michigan will remain near the bottom of the 50 states with one of the worst jobless rates in the nation.

On a brighter note, the state's December rate was 0.8 percentage point lower than in December 2004, when it was 7.5%. And the state's 6.8% average annual unemployment rate for 2005 showed a decline of 0.3 percentage point from 2004's annual rate of 7.1%.

That marked the first annual average unemployment rate decline in Michigan since 2000, said Rick Waclawek, director of DLEG's Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives.

Patrick Anderson, a Lansing-based economic consultant, said the state faces more risks ahead than chances for an upbeat recovery anytime soon.

"The gap between the United States and the state of Michigan is growing, not declining," he said.

"What's particularly scary is that Michigan's unemployment is so high at a point in the business cycle when it normally does well."

The unemployment rate is not computed using the number of people who receive unemployment benefits. It is based, instead, on a monthly survey of households.

A second survey, covering employers, produces monthly payroll data. The payroll survey for December showed that Michigan added 10,000 jobs during the month but lost 24,000 jobs for the year out of a total payroll of 4.4 million jobs.

According to the payroll survey, big gains in December were recorded in professional and business services (up 5,000 jobs), government (up 4,000) and other services (up 2,000).

Somewhat offsetting these gains was a decline in education and health services (down 3,000). All other major industry categories were little changed over the month.

Michigan's hard-hit manufacturing sector added 1,000 jobs during December, but remained down 21,000 jobs for all of 2005.

Late last year, economic researchers at the University of Michigan forecast that the state would record a record sixth straight year of job losses during 2006 before finally seeing a modest turnaround in 2007.

Contact **JOHN GALLAGHER** at 313-222-5173 or gallagher@freepress.com.

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REPORT NO. 11 VOLUME 45 WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18, 2006

UNEMPLOYMENT UP FOR DECEMBER, DOWN FOR 2005

The state showed a year-to-year drop in its unemployment rate for the first time since 2000, even though December's job picture worsened from the prior month and economists see rising jobless rates for the next two calendar years, the Department of Labor and Economic Development reported Wednesday.

The seasonally adjusted rate for 2005 edged down by .3 percentage points to 6.8 percent from 2004. Economic circumstances were markedly different six years ago when the state last recorded a drop in the jobless rate from the prior year, as 2000 marked the year when the state recorded its lowest unemployment rate in history at 3.2 percent in May of that year.

Now, forecasters say the rate will average 7.1 percent for 2006 and will see little change in the following year.

"2005 marked the first annual average unemployment rate decline in Michigan since 2000," said Rick Waclawek, director of DLEG's Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives. "Michigan's 2005 jobless rate of 6.8 percent edged down three-tenths of a percentage point from the 2004 rate of 7.1 percent."

A similar claim for Michigan was made last year, but the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics adopted a modified methodology to calculate unemployment rates in March 2005.

The 6.7 percent rate for December was .1 percentage points higher than November, but the fifth consecutive month it stayed below 7 percent. Over the past four months, total employment has held nearly even at 4.795 million. The monthly rate was also down .8 percentage points from the 2004 December rate, a somewhat better trend than changes in the national average, which dropped by .5 percentage points.

However, the state rate remains substantially higher than the 4.9 percent national average.

The rise in unemployment is a reflection of a continued slow boost in the state's labor force, which increased by about 1 percent or 52,000 persons in December.

The state's civilian labor force increased by 5,000 for the month and 46,000 over the entire year to a new level of 5.139, while employment fell by 2,000 in the month and grew by 87,000 for the year.

The department said payroll jobs increased in professional and business services (up by 5,000 for the month and 8,000 higher over the entire year), government (up 4,000) and other services (up 2,000), while education and health services lost 3,000 jobs.

The DLEG survey also indicated that the state's hard-hit manufacturing sector leveled off in the September-December period, with payroll jobs remaining relatively unchanged. But for the year, manufacturing (which lost 20,000 jobs to a new level of 670,000), along with government and trade/transportation/utilities accounted for most of the decline in total payroll jobs in the state.

The unemployment rate in the Detroit-Warren-Livonia metropolitan area was little changed, increasing by .1 percentage point to 7.3 percent in December from the prior month. For the year, the average rate was 7.2 percent, up by the same .1 percentage point from 2004.

MIRS

January 18, 2005

Unemployment Slightly Up

Michigan's unemployment rate ended 2005 slightly above the prior month, but, overall, 2005's numbers were better than 2004's.

According to the Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG), unemployment was 6.7 percent in December, up from 6.6 percent in November. In December 2004, state unemployment rate was at 7.5 percent.

Even with December's slight .1 percent increase in unemployment, this is the fifth month in a row that state unemployment has been less than seven percent and 2005 is the first year since 2000 that the state's seen an annual average decrease in unemployment.

Supervisors Are Suspended After Girl's Death

By LESLIE KAUFMAN and JIM RUTENBERG
The New York Times

Published: January 19, 2006

Six New York City child welfare workers were suspended or reassigned yesterday for their roles in the failed investigations leading up to the death of a 7-year-old girl in Brooklyn. The commissioner of children's services also announced a reorganization of his top aides aimed at improving the oversight of hundreds of frontline abuse investigators.

Commissioner John B. Mattingly, speaking at a news conference after a week of embarrassing disclosures about the city's Administration for Children's Services, said he was taking action against the six workers because they had failed to take "basic and important steps" in the investigation of complaints of abuse and neglect involving the girl, Nixzmary Brown.

Prosecutors say the child was abused by both her parents over many months and was ultimately beaten to death by her stepfather last week, even though concerns about her safety were known to child welfare caseworkers, school personnel and the police.

"The staff made poor investigative decisions and gave inadequate attention to clear warning signs of the danger Nixzmary Brown was facing," Mr. Mattingly said. "While it's true that this work is extremely difficult, these are examples of incomplete and inadequate steps. Everyone at Children's Services must act with urgency and absolute thoroughness when responding to allegations of abuse and neglect. That's what the city expects and that's what I expect."

The three agency workers who were suspended were those most directly involved in the handling of Nixzmary's case. Mr. Mattingly suspended without pay Andrew Bartley, the supervisor who handled the first reports of neglect involving Nixzmary last May, when the case went nowhere, though the child had missed 47 days of school and had suffered a variety of injuries.

He also suspended without pay Joyceline St. Hill and one other supervisor, who both investigated a December report by school officials that Nixzmary might have been physically

abused. The child was not seen by a doctor, and no caseworker ever gained access to the child's home or sought a warrant to get inside the family's apartment after the stepfather refused to cooperate. The names of the workers disciplined were not released by the agency, but two of them were confirmed by a person with direct knowledge of the action.

Three other child welfare workers in the Brooklyn office that handled Nixzmary's case were not suspended but were reassigned to a new supervisor.

Mr. Mattingly said he had asked the city's Department of Investigation to conduct its own inquiry into the handling of the case to determine if there was actual wrongdoing - falsifying records, for instance - by any of the caseworkers or their supervisors.

Mr. Mattingly announced no changes in actual policy - involving, say, how investigations are conducted - and reiterated that the city already had implemented nationally respected training programs and other reforms over the last decade. However, several of the changes involving senior agency officials made clear how seriously the fallout from the botched case was being treated.

As a first step, he said that the agency's executive deputy commissioner, Zeinab Chahine, would be working full time on child safety issues throughout the agency and would take direct authority for the Division of Child Protection. Ms. Chahine was in fact director of child protection until Mr. Mattingly promoted her a year ago. He never named a permanent replacement.

Mr. Mattingly also announced the establishment of a new ombudsman's unit at the agency. Now, employees at any city agency, or at the dozens of private nonprofit agencies involved in child welfare work, can call the ombudsman's office for immediate assistance when they have concerns about the progress of a child protective investigation.

City officials said Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg had been "deeply involved" in the drafting of the new managerial plan.

The caseworkers and the supervisors who are being suspended or reassigned are civil servants and cannot be fired immediately, the agency said. Joseph Cardieri, general counsel of the child welfare agency, said the workers would be suspended for 30 days, or until an administrative hearing. Penalties, if they are assessed, could range from a reprimand to termination. In the case of Elisa Izquierdo, a 6-year-old girl killed by her mother in 1995, the agency fired one caseworker and suspended a supervisor.

Charles Ensley, the president of Social Services Employees Union Local 371, which represents the caseworkers, called the commissioner's actions yesterday inappropriate.

"If in fact the commissioner found some failure in casework practice, the most appropriate response would have been additional training," Mr. Ensley said. He warned that "workers will start removing children at the least sign of abuse, and that is not good practice."

Child protective services first heard of Nixzmary last May, when her school guidance counselor reported her prolonged absence from school. Despite additional notes reporting bruising and an interview with her older brother, who said she had been burned, the caseworkers did not determine that she had suffered what is known as "educational neglect."

Mr. Mattingly called such a finding impossible to understand.

In December, the agency received a straightforward complaint of abuse from the Brooklyn elementary school that Nixzmary attended with several of her siblings.

Although agency workers interviewed Nixzmary and her siblings at the school the day the complaint was made, they never took the 7-year-old to a medical professional to have her injury evaluated and never again met with any family members. Neither Nixzmary nor her siblings

attended a day of school in the month before she was found naked and dead on the floor of her Brooklyn apartment.

Mr. Bloomberg, who attended the girl's wake on Tuesday, did not attend yesterday's announcement. And the announcement itself was not held in the Blue Room at City Hall, but at child welfare headquarters.

But senior aides said that the location of the announcement was in keeping with the mayor's statements that he has full confidence in Mr. Mattingly to sort out whatever problems the case has brought to light.

Officials said last night, however, that the changes announced yesterday would not necessarily be the last new efforts meant to improve the handling of abuse cases.

Driver found drunk with child, 5, in car

Thursday, January 19, 2006

By Scott Hagenpar
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A 32-year-old Springport woman was passed out drunk when sheriff's deputies found her and her 5-year-old son sitting in their car in a ditch Wednesday morning.

The woman is expected to be charged today with a misdemeanor count of drunken driving and a misdemeanor count of child endangerment in Calhoun County. Her name is not being released until her arraignment.

Authorities were alerted to the situation about 10 a.m. by a 35-year-old Olivet woman who was driving on 27 Mile Road near L Drive North in Sheridan Township, about five miles from Springport.

She noticed an older-model Ford in the ditch and saw a woman slumped over the steering wheel so she honked her horn to see if everything was OK, said Lt. Matthew Saxton of the Calhoun County Sheriff's Department.

"Then, all of a sudden, she saw a little kid in the back window wiping off the condensation," Saxton said. The witness then called police. Saxton estimated the woman had been parked in the ditch for at least a half-hour.

The woman's son, who was sitting in the passenger seat, told the witness that his mother was sleeping, Saxton said.

Sheriff's deputies found her unconscious with an unfinished 40-ounce bottle of Bud Light between her legs.

"It wasn't her first (beer)," Saxton said.

Deputies roused the woman and gave her a breathalyzer test. The woman registered a blood-alcohol content of 0.24, three times the legal limit. Neither the child nor the mother were injured. The arrest was the woman's second for drunken driving, said Deputy Steve Hinkley.

The child was placed in the care of an unnamed guardian, and the case was forwarded to child protective services, Hinkley said.

Man arrested in sex sting

Griffin, 35, sought sex with teen

By Jason Alley, Heritage Newspapers

PUBLISHED: January 19, 2006

A Ypsilanti resident is one of three men behind bars after being arrested in a sex-sting operation orchestrated by the Macomb County Sheriff's Department.

Shane Eugene Griffin, 35, is charged with two counts of communicating with another to commit a crime, two counts of sexually abusive activity and one count of accosting a child for immoral purposes.

If convicted, he faces 20 years in prison. He is being held in the Macomb County Jail on a \$100,000 cash/surety bond.

Griffin's arrest was one that has become all too familiar to police officers.

"Our undercover people were online chatting for some time as underage girls when men started talking to them," said Capt. Tony Wickersham, who is leading the case.

"The conversation turns mostly graphic about having sexual relations with each other. Over the course of the investigation, the men talked about it several times. They arranged a meeting and were arrested when they arrived at the home."

Griffin chatted over a three-week period with an undercover officer portraying herself as a 14-year-old girl, officers said. He was arrested Dec. 28 when he showed up to have sex with her.

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel announced the three arrests, all of which have occurred since Dec. 21, at a Jan. 6 press conference. Also charged were Erik Anthony Bacheldor, 26, of Warren and Ian Thomas Ormanian, 23, of Lincoln Park.

The men all drove to the same Macomb Township house after initiating the online sex talk and wanting to meet a person they thought was a young girl, Hackel said.

Mike Rizzo, owner of Express Builders and a reservist with the sheriff's office, allowed the deputies to use the house, which is a model of the type his company constructs.

The house, which is less than a mile from where Hackel lives, is kept up to date so that it appears occupied.

Using a private home is a new tactic for the sheriff's department, which traditionally has arranged these types of meetings in public places.

"We're trying to knock off another avenue," Hackel said. "These guys get more sophisticated with time. We've done the public places meetings and now sometimes guys become suspicious with that idea. So we moved on to trying something new with an actual house."

Officers assigned to the Macomb Area Computer Enforcement squad are online chatting at all times of the day and night so that predators don't notice a pattern of when officers are patrolling the Web.

"It gives parents the sense of security that the cops are watching out for kids," Hackel said. "Sometimes, kids don't heed the advice of adults to stay away from these types of conversations."

Ideally, he said, his unit can one day be abolished.

"Hopefully this creates that sense of danger and realism that I could get caught by the cops if I'm out there doing this," Hackel said. "I hope we can sit in an Internet chat room and never have to talk to one of these perverts again."

Contact Heritage Newspapers Staff Writer Jason Alley at jalley@heritage.com or at 1-734-246-0867.

Man, 68, faces sex charges

Thursday, January 19, 2006

THE SAGINAW NEWS

CLARE -- A Harrison man faced arraignment today in Clare County District Court on charges of sexually assaulting young children repeatedly since 1989.

The 68-year-old man faces 10 counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct involving a child younger than 13 at a former residence in Dodge City in 1989, the Clare County Sheriff's Department reported.

Prosecutors also have charged him with six counts of second degree-criminal sexual conduct involving two children younger than 13 last year at his home in Harrison.

The suspect faces up to life imprisonment.

Police arrested the suspect Wednesday.

January 18, 2006

Two accused of taking photos of nude teen girls

By IAN C. STOREY

Record-Eagle staff writer

TRAVERSE CITY - Two Grawn residents pleaded not guilty to charges they gave alcohol to underage girls during a holiday party to entice them to disrobe and pose for more than 100 photos.

Carey Wade Kiogima, 23, and his girlfriend, Tiponya Rae Woodcox, 19, each face two felony counts of child sexually abusive activity after they allegedly took photos of two 17-year-old girls during a New Year's Eve party at their home.

"At this party there were quite a few younger people over to their place," said Sheriff Scott Fewins. "They ended up getting a couple of the girls naked and started taking quite a few pictures of them."

Fewins said a third person came forward and told police of the incident, information that led to a search warrant at the couple's Blair Township home and the seizure of 131 Polaroid pictures.

Both Kiogima and Woodcox were arraigned on 20-year felony charges Tuesday by 86th District Court Judge Michael Haley, who released them on 10-percent, \$10,000 bonds.

Haley also ordered the couple to not have contact with anyone under 18 years old.

The two alleged victims told sheriff's Detective Todd Heller that they allowed the couple to take photos in exchange for alcohol, according to the criminal complaint in 86th District Court.

Kiogima and Woodcox are scheduled to appear in court again on Jan. 31.

Dearborn Teacher Accused Of Molesting Students

Students Say They Were Invited For Sleepover

POSTED: 8:43 am EST January 19, 2006

DEARBORN, Mich. -- A Dearborn teacher accused of molesting two students faces charges. Kelvin McCormack (pictured), 46, of Melvindale, was charged with two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct Tuesday, according to police. McCormack was considered a trusted teacher and wrestling coach at Fordson High School, and also worked as a youth pastor at a Dearborn church, Local 4 reported.

Police started their investigation of McCormack after two male students were invited to the coach's home at the Northpointe Townhomes in Melvindale for a sleepover this past Labor Day weekend, according to the station's report.

"He invited the two young men to his condo where they all slept in the same bed together," said Melvindale police Detective David Taft.

Taft said because of McCormack's role as a teacher, coach and youth pastor, the students "didn't think anything about it. They trusted him."

Both of the teenage boys said McCormack fondled them while at his home, Local 4 reported.

McCormack was released on a \$50,000 bond. A preliminary hearing was scheduled for Feb. 13. McCormack has since been fired from Fordson High School, Local 4 reported.

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Janitor put on paid leave

Thursday, January 19, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

CUTLERVILLE -- A South Christian High School janitor is on paid leave after he was charged with sexual assault. Daniel Lee Baar, 31, of Cutlerville, who worked the evening shift at the school, was charged last week with three counts of third-degree sexual assault involving a 17-year-old girl, court records show. The teen, who was not a student at the school but knew the suspect, told deputies she had a sexual relationship with him for two months, a court affidavit states. He's accused of assaulting her at the school and his home. Deputies said Baar admitted he had a sexual relationship with the girl. Baar was put on leave last week, Principal Larry Plaisier said. "It hurts the family, the school and Dan, obviously," he said.

Protecting pupils in our schools

Saginaw News

Wednesday, January 18, 2006

There's no quibble with fingerprinting teachers and other school employees to protect students from sexual predators. The fact is, school districts have fingerprinted and conducted background checks on job applicants for more than a decade. Background checks of school employees are a critical part of the hiring process.

Yet who pays for districts to comply with a new state law?

Beginning Jan. 1, all schools and day-care centers are required to take new fingerprints and do background checks on all employees. Lawmakers drafted the rules to keep convicted sex offenders away from children. Districts must comply by mid-2008.

Whether the district, the teacher or the state should pick up the \$70 cost for fingerprinting remains an unanswered question.

To their credit, Saginaw County Intermediate School District Superintendent Rick Lane said Saginaw County districts are joining forces to save costs -- rather than forcing each district to contract out for the service. The ISD is purchasing mobile fingerprinting equipment for about \$15,000. Lane says fingerprinting of every employee in Saginaw County will cost about \$35,000. Some of the costs are fixed, because background checks cost a flat \$54 through the Michigan State Police. But the ISD hopes to save on the \$10 to \$12 in other costs it would pay, Lane says, if districts had to hire private firms to do the checks.

The ISD already assists the 13 districts in Saginaw County with purchasing, transportation and other cost-sharing services. Collaboration is important as districts struggle with declining enrollment, increasing health care costs and flat state funding. The state and school district employees need to do more to help local districts keep costs down.

Districts have and should conduct background and criminal checks of all employees. Parents must have a strong degree of confidence in their children's safety at school.

There's no argument with keeping school children safe, and the Intermediate School District and its members deserve credit for keeping down the costs of complying with the new laws. The state shouldn't forget its obligations.

Medicare Part D drug benefit a headache for pharmacists

BY TRACEY BIRKENHAUER
tbirkenhauer@mbizreview.com

Pharmacist Al Knaak summarizes the implementation of Medicare's prescription drug benefit with one word: confusion.

Medicare Part D, as the program is called, was launched Jan. 1. Three weeks later, the co-owner of Village Pharmacy II is still working overtime and scheduling extra staff to assist frustrated customers and stand around on hold to understaffed Medicare and drug plan hotlines. He estimates his costs for the month are up 15 percent to 20 percent as a result.

An independent community pharmacist, Knaak says it's his duty to assist confused patients.

"I'm frustrated more by what I see patients going through," he said. "I'm used to frustration. But I'm really unhappy with the way things are happening with patients." The system tried to charge one of his customers \$44 for a drug that should have cost less than \$5.

Knaak was on the phone for more than an hour and still was unable to resolve the issue. The customer couldn't afford \$44, so Knaak gave her the medication and said they'd work out payment after he resolved the issue with the insurer.

"We won't deny a patient," he said. "We make sure they have enough medicine so they don't go off it."

Most pharmacists can't or won't go to this extreme.

Low-income, sick and disabled Americans are being overcharged hundreds of dollars for medications. As a result, many aren't taking their medicine because they simply can't afford it. At least a dozen states have stepped in to provide emergency relief.

Retail pharmacists nationwide are managing significant operational issues while filling an estimated 1 million prescriptions a day for Part D enrollees.

Many who signed up for the program months ago still don't have drug cards or understand in which plan they're enrolled. Since many customers have incorrect information, pharmacists must confirm their participation in the federally funded plan before they can dispense drugs to them.

A pharmacist for 31 years, Knaak said, "This is the most significant overall change we've ever seen in the pharmacy business because there are so many different choices and so much confusion."

Many private insurers are offering drug coverage under contract to Medicare. In the Ann Arbor area, Knaak said there are 18 plans with 41 different choices

"Unfortunately, a lot of the burden of implementing the program is falling on the shoulders of our pharmacists," said Carol Cooke, director of external communications for the National Community Pharmacists Association. "Our members operate on thin margins as it is. If we're adding 60 minutes per dispensing of each prescription on the

phone or on the Web or to fax and confirm information, that is definitely costing our members."

The good news is that it's getting better every day. And many Americans have access to prescription drugs that may have been unaffordable to them before.

Contact reporter Tracey Birkenhauer at (734) 302-1721 or tbirkenhauer@mbizreview.com.

District To Plug Medicare Drug Gap

City Joins States Covering Those Missed by Plan

By Susan Levine Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, January 19, 2006; Page A01

The District will temporarily pay for medicines for thousands of elderly and disabled residents caught in the mess of computer troubles and bureaucratic breakdowns that have marked the new Medicare drug program's start, Mayor Anthony A. Williams said yesterday.

Neither Virginia nor Maryland has taken such action, though nearly two dozen states across the country have decided to cover the prescriptions of low-income beneficiaries as a public health emergency. Many people were being refused critical medications or were being charged as much as 80 times their usual co-payment.

All of these "dual eligibles" -- medically and economically vulnerable people who receive Medicare and Medicaid -- should have been shifted automatically Jan. 1 from local Medicaid drug provisions. But because of myriad problems with the new, incompletely tested system, some were never enrolled in new insurance plans, and others were put in plans that do not include their prescriptions.

Federal health officials pledged Tuesday to intensify efforts to remedy Medicare Part D, as the drug benefit is known. However, they did not say whether they would reimburse states or local jurisdictions that step in with stop-gap measures, as Williams urged yesterday.

The mayor's directive sets aside as much as \$3 million from the city's contingency cash reserve to assist these individuals. Over the next three months, their biggest bill should be their usual \$1 or \$3 co-payment, according to his announcement.

"I'm hoping that the federal government will move quickly to smooth out the flaws in this new program so that no American is denied basic health care," Williams (D) said.

Virginia officials have not ruled out following suit. Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) was briefed about problems there but wants to wait on a decision until he can gauge the effect of recent Bush administration directives to fix the program. Despite several health care advocates describing clinics from Arlington to Abingdon as inundated with calls, administration officials said they believed the number of complaints was lower than in other states.

In Maryland, where lawmakers are contemplating no action, Baltimore is filling the breach with support and dollars. In 18 days, its "Surveillance and Response Initiative" has received dozens of reports of difficulties from local pharmacies and has paid more than \$2,000 on 10 individuals' prescriptions.

"It's showing no signs of letting up," city Health Commissioner Joshua M. Sharfstein said yesterday. "We're moving past some problems and finding others."

Sharfstein himself talked to one woman as she stood, crying, at her pharmacy counter. "I need my medicine. I'm afraid to go home," the woman said. The commissioner told her to put the pharmacist on the line. "I said, 'We're going to pay for it.' "

Yet the volume of calls in Baltimore is but a fraction of the concern in the District. Nearly 10 percent of the 16,000 D.C. residents who qualify for Medicare and Medicaid have called local help-lines in worry or panic this month. Many remain without coverage.

At the Health Insurance Counseling Project, part of George Washington University's National Law Center, director Suzanne Jackson arrived one morning last week to find 200 voice-mail messages. There usually are 150 calls a month. "This is the crisis of the day, " she said.

Among the messages waiting yesterday: A woman trying to help her mother, who speaks no English. A gravely-voiced senior who said she had lost her ID card. A man calling in reference to "the medical situation" who left out several digits of his phone number. Another woman who immediately became a priority because she mentioned "it's about my medications."

Jackson and her staff have handled cases in which cardiac prescriptions were denied. One pending situation involves a widow who is recuperating from spinal surgery and has two metal plates in her back. Because Medicare did not enroll her in a new plan, she has been unable to get pain pills.

"These cases take hours" to resolve, Jackson said.

The project joined with the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia and Health Assistance Partnership, Families USA, in writing the mayor a detailed, impassioned letter requesting his emergency action. "This doesn't make any sense, from a public health perspective, having people go to the ER," said Eric Angel, legal director of the law group.

One of the organization's recent triumphs came after a week of pressure by staff attorney Sarah Lichtman Spector. Client Fredrica F. Gonzales called when her longtime pharmacist could not find her in any Part D database. By the time Spector helped solve that mystery -- the District native, it turns out, had been assigned to a plan -- Gonzales was out of several prescriptions. The new system wanted to charge her standard deductibles to refill them.

"I was hyper, angry and anxious," she said. The total exceeded \$80 for just three of her seven medicines. Gonzales, who has bipolar disorder, high blood pressure and asthma, lives on \$627 a month.

Staff writers Chris L. Jenkins and Mary Otto contributed to this report.

Published January 19, 2006

Program lets kids get dental care at school Dentists, assistants treat young students at little or no cost

By Hugh Leach
Lansing State Journal

Austin Cantwell-Wilson, 5, was excused from his kindergarten class at Attwood Elementary School for a dental appointment Wednesday morning.

But he was back in class in less than 30 minutes.

Instead of going to the dentist, the dentist came to him and 18 other Attwood students who were signed up to participate in the Healthy Kids Mobile Dental Program.

Advertisement

"It helps meet the dental care needs for our students," said school nurse Patty West. "They're more likely to get the care they need if the dentist comes to them."

Nearly 500 students in Lansing elementary and middle schools were seen by dentists in the program last year for exams, fillings, extractions and other basic dental services.

Students at Elsie's E.E. Knight Elementary School will receive the services beginning next fall.

"Often this is the first time a child has seen a dentist," said Dr. Rommel Dinkha, the dentist who visited Attwood on Wednesday along with dental assistant Hayley Scharping and X-ray technician Darlene Kindt.

"We try to make the visit as friendly as possible for the student."

Some, like Austin, thought the visit was fun. He said he had been to a dentist before and didn't mind someone looking inside his mouth.

The first patient of the day was a little frightened, Kindt said.

"I said we would take just one X-ray to start with to see how he liked it," she said. "He didn't have a problem with it and was laughing when he walked out of the room."

The program is operated by Home Dental Management Group of Southfield and serves schools throughout the southern two-thirds of Michigan's Lower Peninsula.

"We set up like any normal dentist's office," said Dawn Thorpe, school program manager for Home Dental Management Group.

"It takes about 30 minutes to set up," Thorpe said. "We just need two rooms with access to running water and electrical outlets and someone from the local school to assist in signing up children."

While the program employs some full-time dentists, others participate on a part-time basis and have their own practices, she said.

Home Dental Management also serves nursing homes, juvenile facilities, foster care homes and correctional institutions. While there is a charge for those services, the only charge for services at schools is what may be covered by a student's family's insurance.

"In the Lansing School District, we are working with individual schools," Thorpe said. "When possible, we like to work with the entire school district. When we can do that, we usually visit each school about once a month."

The program does not refer students to other dentists, she said, because too often they never make appointments for the treatment they need. Instead services not provided during the initial visit to a school are scheduled for a follow-up visit.

Contact Hugh Leach at 377-1119 or hleach@lsj.com.

Healthy Kids program

- What: A mobile dental program offered by Home Dental Management Group LLC of Southfield to provide basic dental services to school children in participating districts.
- Services: Oral examinations, fillings, extractions, sealants, cleaning, X-rays, fluoride treatment.
- Where: Services offered in participating schools.
- Cost: Medicaid and some other dental insurances are billed. No cost to the uninsured.
- Service area: Southern two-thirds of Michigan's Lower Peninsula.
- Information: Dawn Thorpe, school program manager, (800) 380-9582, ext. 138.

Source: Home Dental Management Group LLC

Dental facts

- Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease - five times more common than asthma and seven times more common than hay fever.
- More than 50 percent of children 5-9 years old have at least one cavity or filling.
- Poor children have twice as much tooth decay as their more affluent peers and it is more likely to go untreated.
- 25 percent of poor children have not seen a dentist before entering kindergarten.
- More than 51 million school hours are lost each year to dental-related illness. Pain and suffering due to untreated diseases can lead to problems in eating, speaking and attention to learning.

Source: "Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General"

Alleged sexual assault victim now charged with attempted murder

Wednesday, January 18, 2006 4:16 PM EST

An assault case filed against Cheryl Ruple has caused a new delay in prosecuting her husband.

By Dennis Pelham

Daily Telegram Staff Writer

ADRIAN - A woman who claimed self defense in slashing her husband's penis during an assault in November was arraigned Tuesday on a murder attempt charge for cutting his arm during an argument on Jan. 5.

Cheryl Ann Ruple, 39, of Tecumseh was arraigned from the Lenawee County Jail by video camera on charges of assault with intent to murder, assault with intent to do great bodily harm and felonious assault. A \$30,000 bond was continued by Judge James E. Sheridan.

According to Lenawee County Sheriff's Department reports, she held a utility knife to the neck of Jobie Gene Ruple, 47, and slashed his wrist and arm as he struggled with her while driving a car in Dover Township. He told deputies he was able to take the knife from her and threw it out his window before driving to a friend's home in Adrian for help.

The assault case filed against Cheryl Ruple caused a new delay in prosecuting her husband on felony assault and attempted criminal sexual conduct charges.

Defense attorney James Daly of Adrian objected to a prosecution request to adjourn a preliminary examination scheduled to begin Tuesday on the sex and assault charges against Jobie Ruple. The hearing was delayed by Judge Natalia M. Koselka until April 26.

"He has pleaded not guilty. He's innocent of that charge," Daly said. "Frankly, I expect when all the facts come in, these charges against Mr. Ruple will be dismissed."

Jobie Ruple is accused of beating and attempting to rape his wife at their Raisin Township apartment on Nov. 21 where he suffered a 6cm-long (2.4-inch) slash on his penis, according to a sheriff's department report. Cheryl Ruple claimed she used a paint scraper to defend herself from a sexual assault.

Deputies who were called to the apartment during the violent fight noted his injuries as well as cuts Cheryl Ruple suffered on her face, hands, feet and legs. The husband and wife told

deputies the fight began after a night of smoking crack cocaine.

Both were treated and released at Herrick Memorial Hospital for their injuries and taken to jail.

Jobie Ruple was originally held on a \$250,000 bond but was released on personal recognizance on Dec. 5 when a preliminary examination was first adjourned.

Cheryl Ruple pleaded guilty to a probation violation charge for using cocaine and was given a 10-day jail term. She is on probation from a 2004 conviction for resisting police.

Sheriff's department officials said the Jan. 5 assault happened after Jobie Ruple drove to Toledo and picked up his wife from an alleged drug house she had called him from. He reported he was assaulted with the utility knife when they argued as he drove around the Clayton area.

Both Cheryl and Jobie Ruple were returned to jail Jan. 5. She was held on new probation violation charges pending the outcome of the assault investigation. He remains in jail in lieu of a \$50,000 bond set for violating a provision of his personal recognizance bond that he not have contact with his wife.

Wife admits hot-oil attack

Thursday, January 19, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Standing with her translator, her hands folded before her, My-Hanh Thi Nguyen appeared demure before Kent County Circuit Judge Donald Johnston. But her crime of pouring hot oil over the body of her sleeping husband drew gasps and chatter from court watchers.

Nguyen, 49, of Gaines Township, initially was charged with assault with intent to commit murder, a life offense. On Wednesday, she pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of assault with intent to cause great bodily harm less than murder.

Nguyen listened to the charges through an interpreter, then said, "Yes, I plead guilty."

She faces up to 10 years in prison at sentencing March 21.

Her 49-year-old husband, Nhan (Van) Mai, remained in critical condition at Spectrum Health Blodgett Campus' burn unit. He has been fighting infections as he recovers from burns to more than 70 percent of his body, suffered in the Sept. 16 assault.

The court held open its option to charge the wife with murder if the husband dies. But it cannot use her guilty plea against her, an assistant prosecutor said.

Sheriff's detectives said Nguyen was upset over finances and her husband's alleged relationships with other women when she heated cooking oil and poured it on her husband, who was on a couch. They had argued while she cooked breakfast that morning, police said.

Family members who appeared with Nguyen in court Wednesday declined to comment.

Man Faces Trial For Allegedly Shaving Girlfriend's Hair

Judge Dismisses Kidnapping Charge

POSTED: 2:45 pm EST January 18, 2006

WARREN, Mich. -- A 22-year-old Warren man will stand trial on a domestic violence charge. James Garvin is accused of shaving off his 18-year-old girlfriend's eyebrows and nearly waist-length hair.

The judge dismissed a more serious kidnapping charge against Garvin after Nicole Carter denied that Garvin held her against her will. Carter said what happened between them last month was consensual.

Investigators said Carter went to Garvin's house in Warren. She later called her grandmother, who came to the house with police.

Garvin's lawyer said the charges are without merit.

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Man Drags Woman Through Parking Lot; Police Called

Suspect Arrested On Suspicion Of Domestic Assault

POSTED: 2:10 pm EST January 18, 2006

A Waterford man is in jail after being accused suspected of beating his live-in girlfriend. Waterford Township police said they received a 911 call about a woman being dragged by the hair across the parking lot of the Tuson Apartments, on Hatchery and Airport roads, at about 10 p.m. Tuesday.

When police arrived, witnesses said a man was beating his girlfriend inside an apartment at the complex. When officers located the apartment, they could hear someone pleading for help. After gaining entry by kicking in the front door, officers said they saw a 19-year-old woman crying and lying on the floor. She had "fresh injuries to her face," according to police, but the injuries were minor.

Police said the suspect, Brian Scott Nordstrom, 24, (pictured, above) swore and threatened police when they tried to arrest him.

"The male suspect was combative; he refused to cooperate with officers," according to the release from the Waterford Township Police Department.

Nordstrom was taken into custody and charged by the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office with a misdemeanor for domestic violence.

Nordstrom was given a \$2,500 bond, but could not post bail. He remains in the Oakland County Jail.

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Disasters, economic woes don't deter United Way drive

Local organization reaches its fundraising goal

Thursday, January 19, 2006

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Natural disasters, corporate downsizing and restructuring were not going to be reasons why the Washtenaw United Way could not reach its \$7.8 million fundraising goal, said the co-chairmen of the 2005 campaign.

"We weren't going to say this is the best we could do," said co-chairman Mike Lypka at the "Results Matter" campaign celebration Wednesday evening. "We weren't going to accept these as excuses.

Volunteers were determined to raise the money, and they did. The Washtenaw United Way met its goal, so far raising \$7,805,954 in money pledged. The agency also met its goal the prior year, which was the same as the 2005 goal.

The announcement was made at a United Way celebration at Washtenaw Community College's Morris Lawrence Building. The official, audited campaign total will be announced in April at the United Way's Board of Director's annual meeting. The campaign kicked off on Sept. 15 and ended Nov. 19.

The money raised will help to support 36 local health and human service agencies, including Ypsilanti Meals on Wheels, which employs volunteers to deliver hot meals to senior citizens in the Ypsilanti area. The fund-raising campaign also supports three United Way community affiliates in Milan, Dexter and Saline.

The most money was raised by the campaign's automotive, educational and major markets divisions. The automotive division, which includes automakers and auto suppliers, raised \$1.74 million, while the educational division, which includes Eastern Michigan University, the University of Michigan and Washtenaw Community College, raised \$1.18 million. The major markets division raised \$2.7 million.

Lypka and co-chairman Mike Anderson work at the Willow Run Powertrain plant in Ypsilanti Township. Lypka is director of global supply chain; Anderson is sourcing representative for UAW Local 735 at the plant.

In honor of Lypka and Anderson, the 2005 campaign featured an automotive theme, "Let's Get It In Gear." In conjunction with the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, the achievement celebration featured sports cars from the Big Three auto companies and spokesmodels, including Ashlee Baracy, Miss Washtenaw County.

During the campaign, Lypka and Anderson visited some of the agencies funded by the United Way and saw their programs firsthand.

"It's amazing what they do for people in the county," Anderson said.

Liz Cobbs can be reached at lcobbs@annarbornews.com or (734) 994-6810.

Money or not, woman's charity endures

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Thursday, January 19, 2006

By Bob Wheaton
bwheaton@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6375

FENTON - It was Christmas Eve, and Nancy Stockham was headed out the door for church when a mother who needed last-minute gifts showed up at her home.

It would have been hard to blame Stockham if she had told the woman that her in-home charity was closed for the holidays.

But Stockham, now 74 and still going strong after decades as the city's unofficial social worker, never really stops working.

She agreed to help.

It wasn't easy. The woman's children were too young to read books or play games, and many of the other Christmas gifts Stockham had collected for the needy had already been given away.

"I was grabbing everything I had," Stockham said.

She scrounged up a couple of dolls, including a Frosty the Snowman that played the organ - a gift that one of her volunteers had given Stockham. She grabbed some ornaments and gave the woman cash to buy more presents. After hearing the story of how Stockham spent her Christmas Eve, it's no surprise she reneged on a vow to shut down her charity at the end of 2005 after a year of financial uncertainty and the continuing onset of old age.

"I couldn't (quit)," she said. "I'll hang in there until I don't make sense, I guess.

"I've always wanted to do this. I've pretty much always been doing it. ... People expect me to do it."

Stockham, a retired Genesee County Friend of the Court caseworker, runs the nonprofit God Rewards All Charitable Endeavors, commonly known as GRACE.

She opens up her S. Adelaide Street home to poor and needy people, dispensing clothing, food, toiletries, car seats and advice. Every weekday there's a steady stream of people going in and out.

Her assistant, longtime friend Marlene Eller, estimates seven large garbage bags of clothes are dropped off every day and an equal number of bags are carried away by GRACE clients. On a typical weekday, 30 to 50 people stop by.

Visitors walk up a wheelchair ramp and are greeted by a sign on the front door that says, "Walk in please. Do not knock or ring doorbell."

Stockham sits in a comfortable candy apple red chair behind a desk in the living room that has a sign on it that reads, "Hi. Can I help you?"

QUICK TAKE

To help Nancy Stockham's GRACE charity accepts monetary donations as well as clothing, food and other necessities.

Information: (810) 629-2384.

About Nancy Stockham

RESIDENCE:

Fenton

AGE: 74

OCCUPATION:

Runs God Rewards

All Christian

Endeavors, or

GRACE, a charity

that helps Fenton-

area residents

PROFESSIONAL

BACKGROUND:

Retired Genesee

County Friend of

the Court

caseworker

EDUCATIONAL

BACKGROUND:

Bachelor's degree

from Alma College,

one year at

University of

Chicago, master's

degree from

University of

Michigan.

Her walker is next to the chair. She's had three surgeries on her right knee and one on her left knee.

On Tuesday, the grandmotherly woman with white hair and spectacles wore a black sweatshirt bearing a picture of Dibbleville, Fenton's historic shopping area.

She keeps the house relatively neat despite all the bags and boxes of donations. The basement is full of thousands of items of clothing hung on racks. The floor of a first-floor office has some two dozen boxes of toys, shampoo, stuffed animals, school supplies and other items.

The garage contains computers, winter coats and dishes. Stockham's 1995 Cutlass Ciera station wagon was parked in the garage Tuesday - a rarity because of the large amount of donations that are usually stored there.

GRACE helps almost anyone who needs assistance, Stockham said.

Her mother used to tell her she was so good at her job because she had common sense, but there are times when even Stockham isn't qualified to help.

One time a woman called and said her husband had used a pump to enhance his manhood, which, once inflated, wouldn't deflate.

"Look lady, I do a lot, but I don't do that," Stockham said she told the woman, suggesting the couple seek medical help.

Unlike some charities, GRACE doesn't charge clients for anything. "We give everything away," Stockham said. "I will never charge a penny."

Stockham said she helps fund the charity with her Social Security check and her county pension. In 2005, she lost city funding of about \$15,000 a year, and United Way funding fell by \$16,000. The \$31,000 in funding cuts socked the agency, which received \$50,000 in 2004.

Lots of people donate clothing and food items, Eller said, but now GRACE really needs cash donations.

Two of its biggest projects are the Christmas Wrap-In, which provides gifts to poor children and senior citizens in nursing homes, and its Thanksgiving food basket program.

Last year, GRACE volunteers wrapped 18,000 gifts. Eller said it handed out gifts to 470 nursing home residents and provided 287 Thanksgiving food baskets.

"Nancy has given her life to this community of Genesee County," said the Rev. Dale Swihart, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Fenton, which Stockham attends. "And I think there will be a large void when she finally does retire.

"There's the outright aid that she's given that has helped an awful lot of people. And she's helped to pull the community together in some of its efforts to help others. She's helped to coordinate a lot of giving."

GRACE is one of two prominent charities in Fenton that help needy people. The other is Fenton Area Resources & Referral Network, which Stockham co-founded and uses proceeds from its thrift store on Mill Street to provide money for rent, utility payments and other necessities to the poor.

Stockham was born in Gary, Ind., and grew up during the Great Depression. Her father was a minister and her mother a teacher.

The family moved to Fenton when she was 13, and she's been there ever since.

Stockham never married.

"Not that I was never asked," she said. "Be sure to put that in. But that was a choice. ... I kind of knew early on that I would be very involved in what I was doing."

Metro Detroit

Voice mail helps those in need stay in touch

People without phones get connected

January 19, 2006

BY SHABINA S. KHATRI

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Wendy Lewis spent nine years caring for her elderly parents. When they passed away last year, she knew it was time to return to the workplace.

But the 53-year-old Detroit resident couldn't afford a cell phone or a landline, and she knew that if potential employers couldn't get in touch with her, they would move on to the next candidate. Lewis said her prayers were answered when she found out about Community Voice Mail (CVM), a national program that helps people in crisis by providing them with a personal phone number at which employers, landlords and others can reach them.

The service, offered through the Southfield-based nonprofit group JVS, has helped Lewis, whose rent is subsidized by a federal program, keep in touch with relatives and stay in the running for jobs.

"It's an excellent program," said Lewis, who is temporarily working at the North American International Auto Show. "I can hand someone my resume and say, 'Please call me.' "

JVS currently provides the voice mail service to about 450 people in Detroit, but will use a \$68,300 grant to add more than 1,000 phone numbers in Wayne, Macomb, Oakland and Washtenaw counties.

"With CVM, the end user is able to be reconnected to the community in a sense," said Tiffany Joshua, vice president of research and development for JVS.

The grant money, recently donated by the Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, will also be used to upgrade the system from analog to digital, Joshua said.

CVM phone numbers are typically distributed through human service agencies, but JVS plans to step up distribution efforts by recruiting area churches, businesses and shelters -- both homeless and domestic. Joshua said CVM gives victims of domestic abuse a way to connect with local shelters, so that if a bed or a service becomes available, they can be immediately notified.

A CVM number looks like any other local telephone number, and CVM users can check messages from pay phones, social service agencies or homes of friends and family.

The most important benefit of the CVM system is the confidence it gives users, Lewis said. "If you have a positive attitude, positive things will come to you," she said.

*For more information, go to www.detroitworkplace.org or call 313-962-9675, 8-5 Monday to Friday. Contact **SHABINA S. KHATRI** at 586-469-8087 or skhatri@freepress.com.*

Minimum-wage hike effort launched

Thursday, January 19, 2006

pdavis@kalamazoogazette.com 388-8583

Travis Meier went to the Raise the Wage Coalition kickoff on Western Michigan University's campus to learn more about a campaign to bring the state's minimum wage up to \$6.85 an hour. But the college junior was already sure that \$5.15 is too low. The reason: "I'm concerned about social justice," he said.

That kind of sensibility is common among college students, Michael Gregor believes, and will greatly aid his group's goal to contribute 13,000 of the 400,000 signatures needed to put the wage proposal on the Nov. 7 ballot.

"Students going to college, they learn about inequality and poverty in the world and students are looking for ways to cope with that and change it," Gregor, a WMU sophomore and coalition coordinator, said after the event Tuesday that drew about 50 people.

The coalition of student organizations at WMU and Kalamazoo College is among groups campaigning to raise Michigan's minimum wage and institute yearly increases tied to inflation, he said. Over the next several months, the local student-led coalition will be seeking support from their college-age peers in the Kalamazoo area.

An hourly minimum wage of \$6.85 would put Michigan among 18 states, plus the District of Columbia, that have a wage above the federal \$5.15 level. In the past 25 years, the federal minimum wage has been boosted a handful of times, increasing it from \$3.35 in 1981 to \$5.15 in 1997.

If the proposal makes it to Michigan's ballot and is approved by voters, the change would take effect Jan. 1, 2007.

State Rep. Alexander Lipsey, D-Kalamazoo, who spoke at the event Tuesday, called the wage increase a matter of justice and fairness. He and Democratic colleagues in Lansing unsuccessfully attempted a similar measure last year.

A minimum wage increase "in conjunction with the concept of a living wage brings us to a position where we as a community can feel all of our citizens, if willing to put forth effort, can become part of a productive, fulfilling community and lifestyle," Lipsey said.

While Lipsey, Meier and others may see minimum-wage increases as a social justice issue, critics have concerns that a raise would hamper economic growth in a time when companies are struggling with expenses.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 18, 2006

Governor Granholm Names Verlie Ruffin Children's Ombudsman

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today announced the appointment of Verlie M. Ruffin as Michigan's Children's Ombudsman.

"Verlie has made it her mission in life to fight for and protect Michigan's children," Granholm said. "I am confident her experience, her leadership, and her compassion will reinforce and strengthen the welfare of our children across the state.

Ruffin, 58, of Detroit, has served for twenty years as the associate director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families. In addition, Ruffin is the board president of Adult Well Being Services, a member of the Advisory Committee on Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Child Welfare, and a member of the Wayne County Children and Youth Collaborative Council, the Michigan Foster Care Review Board Program Advisory Committee, and the State Advisory Committee on Foster Care and Permanency Planning.

Prior to her current position, Ruffin worked at the Child & Family Services Division of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

Ruffin is appointed to serve at the pleasure of the Governor. She succeeds Lynne Martinez who has resigned.

The Office of the Children's Ombudsman is an independent government agency that works to assure the safety and welfare of Michigan children who are in need of foster care, adoption, and protective services. The office independently investigates complaints, advocates for children, and recommends changes to improve law, policy, and practice that benefit children's welfare.

The appointment is subject to Article V, Section 6 of the Michigan State Constitution of 1963. The appointment stands confirmed unless disapproved by the Senate within 60 days.

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Lansing State Journal

January 19, 2006

Ruffin named children's ombudsman

Gov. Jennifer Granholm on Wednesday announced the appointment of Verlie Ruffin as Michigan's Children's Ombudsman. Ruffin replaces Lynne Martinez, who left the position for an unsuccessful run to become mayor of Lansing.

"Verlie has made it her mission in life to fight for and protect Michigan's children," Granholm said in a statement.

The Office of the Children's Ombudsman is an independent agency that works to assure the safety and welfare of children who are in need of foster care, adoption and protective services, according to the statement.

Ruffin, 58, of Detroit, has served for 20 years as the associate director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families. Prior to that, Ruffin worked at the Child & Family Services Division of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

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RUFFIN NAMED CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN

The former associate director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families will now have the responsibility for reviewing child protection activities in the state.

Governor Jennifer Granholm announced Wednesday the appointment of Verlie Ruffin of Detroit as the state's new children's ombudsman. The position is charged with investigating complaints that the Department of Human Services is not taking sufficient action, or is taking too much action, in pursuing child protective services cases.

Ms. Ruffin was associate director for the federation for 20 years and worked for the Child & Family Services Division of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan prior to that. She has also worked with Adult Well Being Services, the Advisory Committee on Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Child Welfare and the State Advisory Committee on Foster Care and Permanency Planning.

The appointment is subject to Senate consent.